



Are Modern Practices of Repentance Truly Biblical?

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Repentance is a foundational aspect of the Christian faith, embodying a sincere turning away from sin and a turning toward God. The Bible provides a clear framework for repentance, emphasizing its necessity for forgiveness and reconciliation with God. However, modern practices of repentance, including those in both Catholic and Protestant traditions, often diverge from the biblical model. This brief article explores what repentance truly is according to Scripture and how contemporary practices can fall short of these teachings.

Understanding Biblical Repentance

Biblical repentance involves more than merely feeling sorry for one's sins; it is a profound transformation of heart and mind that results in a change of behavior. The Greek word for repentance, *"metanoia,"* means a complete change of direction. This transformation is beautifully illustrated in [Acts 3:19](#): *"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord."* True repentance is characterized by several key aspects. First, it involves the recognition of sin, where one acknowledges their sins without offering excuses or justifications, as highlighted in [Psalm 32:5](#). Second, it encompasses godly sorrow, which is a deep remorse and regret for having sinned against God, as described in [2 Corinthians 7:10](#). Third, repentance requires confession, which is an action of our heart towards God, as instructed in [1 John 1:9](#). However, when a believer has wronged another person, the Bible advises that we confess to each other, as stated in [James 5:16](#). This not only helps with reconciliation but also serves as a testimony that can draw others to God.

Additionally, when a sin is committed publicly or has a public impact, it is advisable to repent publicly. This practice is demonstrated in Scripture. For example, in [Acts 19:18-20](#), many who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly, showcasing their repentance and resulting in the word of the Lord spreading widely. Public repentance can serve as a powerful testimony to the community and promote accountability. An illustration of public accountability is seen in [Galatians 2:11-14](#), where Apostle Paul publicly exhorted Peter because he was acting hypocritically by separating himself from the Gentiles: *"When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned... But when I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, 'You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?'"*

Lastly, repentance includes forsaking sin, which means turning away from sinful behaviors and making a heartfelt commitment to live according to God's will, as illustrated in [Isaiah 55:7](#). Reconciliation is also a crucial part of repentance. [Matthew 5:23-24](#) instructs believers to reconcile with their brothers and sisters before offering their gift at the altar: *"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift."* It is important to encourage believers to heartily admit their sins, embrace these steps authentically and sincerely, and seek reconciliation to ensure that their repentance leads to true spiritual renewal.

The Catholic Practice of Confession

The Catholic Church practices the Sacrament of Penance, where believers confess their sins to a priest and receive absolution. Catholics believe this sacrament was instituted by Christ, citing passages such as [John 20:22-23](#), where Jesus gives the apostles the authority to forgive sins. However, this practice raises several concerns. First, the mediation by priests contradicts the New Testament teaching of the priesthood of all believers ([1 Peter 2:9](#)), suggesting that every Christian has direct access to God for forgiveness. [Hebrews 4:16](#) encourages believers to *"approach God's throne of grace with confidence."*

Second, the act of a priest absolving sins can be seen as undermining the unique role of Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity ([1 Timothy 2:5](#)). This practice can be interpreted as a denial of Christ's sacrifice, who paid the penalty for our sins once and for all. [Hebrews 10:10](#) emphasizes that *"we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."* Additionally, [Hebrews 10:12-14](#) states that *"when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God... For by one sacrifice, he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."* These Scriptures affirm that Christ's sacrifice is sufficient and complete, negating the need for priestly mediation.

Protestant Practices of Repentance

While many Protestant denominations emphasize direct confession to God, some modern practices also fall short of biblical repentance. For instance, some believers publicly confess their sins in church without seeking forgiveness from those they have wronged. This practice contradicts the clear instruction in [Matthew 5:23-24](#), which directs believers to reconcile with their brothers and sisters before offering their gift at the altar. Additionally, there are instances where individuals choose to confess their sins in distant churches or prayer rooms among strangers. This behavior prevents true accountability and genuine reconciliation, as repentance should ideally occur within one's community to foster authentic relationships and accountability. Such actions can be seen as a false confession of formality, lacking the essential humility and sincerity that true repentance demands. By avoiding personal reconciliation and opting for superficial public confessions, individuals fail to embody the true spirit of repentance that requires a heartfelt commitment to making amends with those they have wronged.

Moreover, in many Christian communities, especially prayer groups, it is common practice to ask everyone to confess before starting rituals. While this may seem like a good practice, it often renders the act of confession a mere formality. [Isaiah 29:13](#) warns against empty religious practices: *"The Lord says: 'These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught.'"* This demonstrates that without sincere repentance and genuine reconciliation, the act of confession can become hollow and ineffective. Repentance should never be treated as a mere formality or ritual. Everyone should approach God with humility, a repentant heart, and sincerity, even before being asked to confess. Genuine repentance is a heartfelt and ongoing process.

Conclusion

True repentance, according to the Bible, involves a deep, personal commitment to turning away from sin and seeking reconciliation with both God and others. Modern practices, whether in Catholic or Protestant traditions, can sometimes miss the mark. Catholics may rely too heavily on the mediation of priests, while some Protestants might neglect personal reconciliation and accountability.

Believers are encouraged to follow the biblical model of repentance: recognizing and confessing sins, feeling godly sorrow, forsaking sinful behaviors, and making amends with those they have wronged. This approach ensures that repentance is not just a ritual, but a transformative process leading to genuine spiritual renewal. As [Proverbs 28:13](#) reminds us: *"Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy."*

However, it is crucial to understand that our outward expression of confession does not earn us salvation, unless if it stems from true repentance. Salvation is a gift of God through faith in Jesus Christ, not a result of our works or public displays of piety. [Ephesians 2:8-9](#) clearly states: *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."* This means that while confession is important, it is not the act of confession itself that saves us, but rather our genuine faith in Jesus Christ and His finished work on the cross. [Titus 3:5](#) further emphasizes this point: *"He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."* This underscores that salvation is rooted in God's mercy and grace, not in our outward actions or public expressions of repentance.

In conclusion, while repentance is essential for spiritual growth and reconciliation, it is faith in Jesus Christ that grants us salvation. Our outward expressions of confession and repentance should stem from genuine heart transformation and deep faith in God's grace, rather than an attempt to display our faith to the public, thinking we can earn salvation through our actions.

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